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CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
26 July 1985

East-West relations under Gorbachev

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WHAT direction will Soviet relations with the United States take under Mikhail Gorbachev? The summit, scheduled for mid-November should offer a chance to understand and perhaps influence Soviet policy. Meanwhile, the second session of the Geneva arms control talks ended last week with both sides blaming the stonewalling of the other for the lack of progress.

Of course, some observers would say it is too soon to expect clarity after only four months under a new leader. The conventional wisdom has been that he needs several years to consolidate his power before imposing his own mark on policy.

But that certainly has not been true of Mr. Gorbachev. He has decisively taken charge of the party and government apparatus.

Nor has he been reticent in laying out his domestic aims. He has candidly discussed the deficiencies in the Soviet economy. He has rejected the draft five-year plan as inadequate and sent it back for reworking; and he criticized individual ministers by name for inefficiency and poor management. So far, however, *action* has been more limited — such as campaigns for better labor discipline and against alcoholism and corruption. He has stated goals for reforms but has not yet tackled the serious structural problems that lie at the heart of the sluggish economic performance.

In foreign affairs, a major aim seems to be to refurbish the superpower image of the USSR after the many years of decrepit leadership. Thus the modest trade agreement with China; the planned visit to Paris in October; the approaches to Israel; the pressure on Pakistan regarding Afghanistan. As to Eastern Europe, Pravda published a tough demand for discipline and conformity in economic and foreign policy.

The Geneva arms negotiations are the principal point of direct dealing with the US. The Soviets appear seriously concerned about the combined impact of the US defense buildup and the potential of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). If so, they should have a genuine interest in an arms agreement. Moreover, the needs for economic revival should call for relaxed relations with the West and avoidance of increased military spending.

The obvious agreement would be based on reinforcing the ABM Treaty, together with major cuts and restraints on offensive MIVRed missiles (like the SS-18 and 19 or

successors) which especially concern the US. That would be consistent with the US assurances that the SDI program is only for research to determine feasibility, vulnerability, and cost-effectiveness, and that in the interest of stability, any deployment, if undertaken, would have to involve negotiations with the USSR.

At Geneva, however, the USSR has adamantly insisted that any START agreement must foreclose research on strategic defense. The Soviets know that position is not tenable. They have long carried on such research themselves, as permitted by the ABM Treaty, and they know that a ban on it could not be monitored. What is their purpose?

They may be stalling — until they agree on a policy. But the aim may well be to influence the US position. They may be convinced that the US would not consider any restraint on SDI development and deployment at this stage. They are aware that some Reagan advisers would strongly oppose any such restraint. Hence, they may hope to see pressures built up to counter that advice — as a result of the impact of the budget; congressional and public attitudes; and the impatience of allies.

The Soviets may also see delay as a form of pressure on President Reagan, who has only three years more in office in his second term. Gorbachev probably visualizes holding power well into the 1990s. If, as appears, Reagan would hope for a place in history as having contributed to a more stable world, delay may exert more pressure on him than on Gorbachev.

The underlying difficulty is that time may not be on the side of either Reagan or Gorbachev. Without some agreement to regulate SDI and strategic weapons, both sides may follow courses that will be gravely damaging to all and to global stability. The all-out pursuit of SDI and the reaction to it could undermine the present stability based on mutual deterrence without putting anything in its place. Even if SDI might be feasible in terms of the President's visionary aims — which most qualified scientists deny — the result could still be the same.

Consequently, the negotiating tactics on both sides should take account of the risks inherent in not achieving control of both SDI and offensive strategic weapons. The summit in November is not too soon to try to lay out at least a framework for developing an agreement. Filling in the specifics would still take protracted negotiations.

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